

NEWSRELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Warden Mike Mahoney will be available for questions at 4 p.m. in the large classroom of the administration building at Montana State Prison.

Investigation Completed into Misuse of E-mail System

Some Montana State Prison employees face disciplinary action following a month-long investigation by the Department of Corrections into misuse of the state e-mail system by workers there.

Disciplinary action, ranging from counseling to termination, could involve about 47 employees, said Warden Mike Mahoney. One individual has resigned, he said.

The inappropriate use of e-mail was reported by an employee Sept. 26 after he received an objectionable e-mail from another employee, prompting a review of e-mail use by prison officials, department investigators and the department's information technology staff. The investigation discovered instances where state e-mail was used to send personal messages, chain letters, videos, jokes, and pictures or drawings. Some of the items included sexually explicit and racial humor, sexual remarks and nudity.

The investigation, completed Oct. 26, involved reviewing hundreds of e-mails sent or received by about 80 employees. The prison has about 630 employees.

The FBI and Powell County sheriff's office were contacted during the course of the investigation because of concern that possession of one graphic e-mail could be considered a criminal act. The FBI and the sheriff declined to get involved in the matter.

The Department of Corrections also notified the attorney general and the legislative auditor, in the event that the employees' use of state time and resources for sending personal e-mails could be viewed as theft of state resources.

(more)

“This activity is totally unacceptable for Department of Corrections employees and we take it extremely seriously,” said Corrections Director Mike Ferriter. “It’s discouraging because this type of behavior distracts the department and the prison personnel from their crucial roles of protecting public safety by managing thousands of offenders on behalf of the people of the state of Montana.”

I’m very surprised and disappointed that some of our staff would spend time on this type of activity rather than working to fulfill the mission of the agency,” he said. “I commend prison officials for responding in a decisive, timely and appropriate manner to the discovery of the problem.”

While concern about inappropriate e-mail use on the job is common among employers, there can be no excuse for corrections employees engaging in this activity, Ferriter said. The prison is considering adopting a complete ban on employee use of state e-mail for any personal use, he added.

“We’re not going to tolerate state employees doing this,” Mahoney said. “Our employees have an obligation to the taxpayers of Montana to conduct state business on state time. Using the state e-mail system to send jokes and other personal messages is a betrayal of public trust.”

The problem was discussed at an Oct. 2 staff meeting at the prison, where the warden and deputy warden condemned in the strongest terms the misuse of e-mail and warned that results of the investigation would lead to disciplinary action against those responsible. That was followed by a memo to all employees at the prison and Montana Correctional Enterprises, reminding them of their obligations to use e-mail only for appropriate purposes and warning of the consequences for failing to do so.

“Staff involved with this type of inappropriate time-wasting activity need to cease and desist immediately,” the memo ordered. “Staff need to use their work time and e-mail system appropriately.”

Those who do not comply could be fired or face other discipline, the memo stated.

Corrections officials, citing the privacy rights of those involved in personnel matters, said they could not identify employees facing disciplinary action due to their e-mail use.

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